



# Big money, environmentalists and the Bears Ears story

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SALT LAKE CITY — In October 2014, a group of people sat around a table and discussed their campaign to bring a monument designation to southeast Utah for the region they called Bears Ears.

This wasn't a group of Native American tribal leaders from the Four Corners, but board members from an increasingly successful conservation organization who met in San Francisco to discuss, among other things, if it was wise to "hitch our success to the Navajo."

Many Utah Navajo are against a monument designation for Bears Ears, but the out-of-state tribal leaders behind the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition who support it insist the effort is one that is locally driven, locally supported and grass-roots in nature.

"None of the drivers of this are coming from the environmental community. It is purely Native American led. This is a Native American led effort. Any suggestion otherwise is not true," said Gavin Noyes, the executive director of Utah Dine' Bikeyah, a nonprofit, Salt Lake City organization that works to protect indigenous lands for future generations.

But the campaign is fueled in part with \$20 million in donations from two key philanthropic foundations headquartered in California — the Hewlett and Packard foundations — that cite environmental protections as a key focus for the grants they award.

Both foundations directed grants to groups like The Wilderness Society for the Bears Ears campaign, or for Colorado Plateau protections to the Grand Canyon Trust or to Round River Conservation Studies, of which Noyes served as director.

In mid-July, the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation announced its biggest ever round of grants for environmental causes — some \$15.6 million — with some of that going to the Bears Ears campaign via Utah Dine' Bikeyah.

Regina Lopez-Whiteskunk, councilwoman for the Ute Mountain Tribe and co-chairwoman of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, said it is an insult to Native Americans for people to accuse them of being influenced by special interest groups.

"It is absolutely, really absurd to say that. It is an insult to say that. (These groups) serve a good purpose for research and support," she said.

Another monument supporter, Utah Dine' Bikeyah's board chairman Willie Grayeyes, said much of that support is with technology.

"They know how to produce mass communications and do social media. We don't do social media. That is why we utilize their skills and connections. People say we are being paid under the table. We are not being paid and are not on salary."

Byron Clarke, vice president of the Navajo community group Blue Mountain Dine' and a member of the Aneth Chapter of the Navajo Nation, does not support a monument designation and said he's bothered by the implications from the San Francisco meeting of the Conservation Lands Foundation.

"The whole tone of it seems like the tribes are generally being used as pawns for the environmental groups to get what they really want," Clarke said. "They are being played. It is somewhat insulting."

## **Cedar Mesa**

In the 2014 meeting, board members discussed the progress of the "Cedar Mesa campaign," which is the Bears Ears area, with chairman Ed Norton inquiring about the dynamics of the tribes and how they were working together.

"There have been some bumps in the road, but progress is being made to gain support from multiple tribes for protection of the Cedar Mesa region," the minutes of the meeting read.

The minutes, too, acknowledge that the Obama administration had more interest in Cedar Mesa than the Greater Canyonlands proposed monument because of tribal leadership.

Calls by environmental groups for the Greater Canyonlands monument designation have all but dimmed. From 2012 to 2014, there was a flurry of activity, with repeated urgings by groups to the White House for monument protection and a letter of support issued by 14 U.S. senators. The focus then apparently shifted.

In the board meeting, Norton questioned if the group was "hitching our success to the Navajo and if so what would happen if we separate from them or disagree with them. Without the support of the Navajo Nation, the White House probably would not act; currently we are relying on the success of our Navajo partners," the minutes read.

The minutes also indicate the local campaign "agreed to the name Bears Ears to move away from a Navajo name," and it became the area and name to push.

Brian O'Donnell, executive director of the Conservation Lands Foundation, said the organization has sought protections for Cedar Mesa since its founding nearly 10 years ago.

"Instead of pushing our Cedar Mesa proposal, we decided it was more important to support theirs," he said.

O'Donnell said the Navajo leaders were already working on ways to protect the Bears Ears region and the meeting was a discussion of other tribes' support of the effort.

"That was a report on how the Navajo was doing with other tribes," he said. "I am frustrated by the continued accusations which imply the tribes can't come up with their own proposal, which is frankly insulting."

With discussion that detailed an upcoming meeting between foundation staff and the then-director of the White House Council on Environmental Quality (tasked with vetting monument proposals) the minutes describe the group's access — and challenges — associated with top Interior Department officials, including Secretary Sally Jewell.

"She is not being a strong advocate for the Antiquities Act, but continues to show gradual improvement. With strong leadership from the White House, this has become less of a roadblock," the minutes read. The Antiquities Act allows the president of the United States to designate national monuments at his discretion.

## **Gaining access**

The effort made to increase access to top Interior Department officials appears to have worked.

Both the Conservation Lands Foundation and The Wilderness Society had staffers who accompanied Jewell on a leg of her "listening tour" last month in Grand and San Juan counties and the Bears Ears region.

Jewell also met with San Juan County commissioners — who are adamantly opposed to the monument designation — but commission member Bruce Adams said they were not invited to tag along on any field visits in their county.

The trip also included top staffers from the offices of Reps. Jason Chaffetz and Rob Bishop, two Utah Republicans who are pushing passage of a massive public lands bill they say will provide adequate protections for the region.

The compromise measure, released last month, is roundly criticized by environmental groups that say it does not go far enough to protect natural resources.

Yet even as the crafting of the public lands bill was ramping up with more than a 1,000 meetings across the state involving multiple groups like Native Americans, environmental organizations and county commissions, the push for a monument designation started down an alternative path trod by players still at the negotiating table.

Board members of Utah Dine' Bikeyah expressed frustration at the planning process to San Juan County commissioners in a letter in 2013, noting their work with Round River Conservation Studies was providing them with the "research, advice and information we desire in a professional manner."

At that time, Noyes had yet to become Utah Dine' Bikeyah executive director and was still at Round Rivers, and Grayeyes, Utah Dine Bikeyah's board chairman, complained that San Juan County leaders were not taking their efforts seriously.

"The county's persistence in challenging RRCS' role is unsettling and threatens our ability to move forward," Grayeyes wrote.

Adams said Utah Dine' Bikeyah has been untruthful about being cut out of the public lands bill, and instead bolted from talks when commissioners weren't 100 percent on board with their proposal and leaders questioned the depth of environmental groups' influence.

### **The coalition**

On its website, the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition describes how the coalition was founded in July of 2015 by the leaders of five tribes who came together.

The coalition's formation, however, was written about months earlier in a rock climbing magazine, which listed Friends of Cedar Mesa, the Conservation Lands Foundation, the Grand Canyon Trust and Utah Dine' Bikeyah as groups that had "banded together."

Josh Ewing's group, Friends of Cedar Mesa, was still in talks that same year with Chaffetz and Bishop over provisions in the yet-to-be unveiled public lands bill that promised the establishment of national conservation areas for the region — designations that differ from monument protections.

Ewing, however, registered the coalition's domain name in 2015 and is listed as its administrative contact. The Grand Canyon Trust notes on its website the voluntary assignment to create the map for the proposed Bears Ears monument and its Native American program manager sends out press releases for the coalition as the media contact.

Those close ties lead monument critics to question the authenticity of the movement.

"This is not a grass-roots Native American effort to protect sacred lands," said Blanding City Manager Jeremy Redd. "This is an effort by environmental groups to get what they want. ... People feel like they are being run over by the money and the organization that these special interest groups have. Sadly, local people don't have that kind of money behind them."

Redd added that the Utah portion of the Navajo nation, Native Americans who live off reservation in San Juan County and the Blue Mountain Dine are nearly "across the board," opposed to the monument designation.

"The general consensus among local people is they feel the process has been co-opted by the environmental groups and special interest groups who want to use the power of the federal government to get their way.

"The farther you get away from being local, the more you are influenced by special interest groups and the money they have," Redd said.

### **Common ground**

Ewing said it is natural for Friends of Cedar Mesa to help the tribes because of the common goal of all entities to protect cultural resources in the region.

"Those who don't have common ground with the tribes and want to continue the status quo are trying to manufacture something that doesn't exist," he said. "It is no secret we have worked to find common ground and we have common interests in protecting cultural resources."

Support for a Bears Ears monument includes outdoor business leaders, who came together Thursday in a press conference at the Outdoor Retailer Show. In a packed room in downtown Salt Lake City, they outlined why 15 leading companies are in support of a national monument designation.

"It is a place that is absolutely iconic in the form of recreational opportunities that are available such as climbing, hiking and water sports. It is an incredible treasure in the state of Utah," said Hans Cole of Patagonia. "As an industry we rely on these protected places, and so for us it is an economic driver. But it is also deeply personal because of the landscape."

Carlton Bowekaty, a Zuni tribal councilman from New Mexico, was at the Bears Ears meadows gathering in July, addressing Jewell on the need for protections in the area.

Later, he dismissed the notion that his people had been overly influenced by environmental groups.

"We rely on them for support, but if I felt like it was not something I could personally support, I would not bring it to the Zuni people," Bowekaty said.

But Clarke said most of the tribal leaders who visited Bears Ears for the Jewell meeting had probably never been there before and likely will not be back again.

"The more distant you are as a Navajo and tribal member the more likely you are to support the monument because you view it as an abstraction or concept or theory of tribal sovereignty," he said. "The closer you get to the monument, the more likely you are to view it as land that can and should be used properly."

The Conservation Lands Foundation boasts on its website that the marathon listening meeting in Bluff attended by more than 1,500 people for Jewell was an "incredible success," with huge showings from their Friends Grassroots Network that includes multiple Colorado-based organizations.

Supporters of monument designations sported blue T-shirts to draw attention to themselves at the event designed for Jewell to hear the issues surrounding the monument debate.

"Secretary Jewell, you came to Utah seeking local input. Unfortunately, what you saw and what you heard was theater staged by radical environmentalist outsiders intent on smothering local voices. This wasn't local grass roots. This was Astroturf," blogged Matthew Anderson, the Sutherland Institute's policy analyst for the Coalition for Self Government in the West.

Chaffetz said he has no doubt tribal leaders are being influenced by environmental groups seeking monument designation.

"I sat with the president of the Navajo Nation last August and he had no idea what Bears Ears was or where it was," he said.

Clarke wonders at what he says is a contradiction inherent in the monument designation.

"Everybody who came out here says it's beautiful, it's wonderful and pristine and we want to keep it that way. I say 'thank you,' because we have been taking care of it the last 100 years," he said.

Monument opponents, he said, are characterized as extreme conservatives who don't care about the land.

Clarke said he doesn't believe tribal officials who support a monument designation could name the landmarks at Bears Ears or know if wood gathering is good at places like Babylon Flat, Duck Lake, Little Dry Mesa or Sweet Alice Springs.

"I'd be met with blank faces. The people who came here from a distance and will return to a distance had to GPS the Bears Ears to get there. I've never had to use GPS out there," he said. "Their idea of protection is to essentially make it famous. How is making it famous and putting it on the map for careless visitors protect it."

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